

# Mediation cycles in non-traditional literature

## 1. General aim & considerations

As a topic for this first essay, I wish to investigate the mediation cycles which occur within the media ecology of non-traditional literature. The work in question will include my findings primarily from the fields of literary theory and textual analysis, drawing from pre-established writings of mainstream authors. I intend on cementing the bases of my essay with a limited number of (what I believe to be) important contributors to the field, notably Katherine Hayles, Espen Aarseth, Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure and perhaps a few more. In the hopes of articulating a potent vocabulary for my own research, I will mainly contrast Aarseth's and Hayle's views on different types of literature, their role in the author/reader collapse and how mediation is created/perceived in their opinion.

The core question underlying this investigation is twofold, and could be formulated as follows : how does reading a text ultimately change it, and how different is this change, if said text pertains to non-traditional literature? This formulation implies an active role on both the reader and the text's part, and certainly contrasts assertions on the nature of different types of literature. I will also put forth the notion of production of new meaning as reader and author come together to create something new : the resulting product of these two agents collapsing, the constructed 'third space'. This thought will be tackled further in the essay while authorship, control and mediation will also be addressed in the same context.

The fields of cyberliterature, literary theory and textual analysis are multidisciplinary to a degree such that makes their exploration impossible without considering the countless ramifications they incur into neighboring spheres. I will try to avoid delving too deep in these collateral subjects, and perhaps consider them as rich material for a later essay. In a grander order of things, I am trying to consider this first incursion in the field as some kind of strategic placement of what can later become important building blocks for subsequent research. In other words, I hope to render this essay self-contained enough to stay relevant and interesting, yet tentative, open-ended and modular enough for successive extension.

## 2.1 Text, Cybertext, Technotext

### Text

In his book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth (1997, p.15) inquires about an "old question [posed] in a new context: what is a text?". He later answers his own question by stating "[it is] any object with the primary function to relay verbal information". In effect, it is then mentioned that "(1) a text cannot operate independently of some material medium, and this influences its behavior (2) a text is not equal to the information it transmits" (Aarseth, 1997, p.62). Already, we can identify two important vectors from which Aarseth constructs his idea of what constitutes a text. The first one, physical presence, the materiality of the object (ultimately, the medium) and the mediating effect it has on its behavior. Secondly, Aarseth states the discrepancy created by the text itself and the meaning a reader extracts, or constructs from it.

From this definition he later derives the terms *scripton* and *texton*, which seem to refer back to De Saussure's concept of signs (signifier/signified). To him (Aarseth, 1997, p.62), these new terms denote "strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exists in the text" in such a way that a limited number of *textons* can generate an exponentially higher number of *scriptons*, using strategies specific to non-linear texts (which will be addressed later). In essence, this means that configurable parts can form an array of different wholes as they are shuffled about. Scriptons and textons maintain

a necessary tension that could be likened to dichotomous pairings such as body/mind, artifact/idea or tool/meaning. Different modular pieces of literature (print and computer based) could be evoked to illustrate this duality, from the ancient *I Ching* (Book of Changes), to *Caligrammes* (Apollinaire) to the contemporary Tale Spin (Meehan).

I suspect Katherine Hayles would concur with Aarseth's last formulation, as she vehemently defends texts' materiality and argues for a reconciliation of representations and the technologies producing them: "books are more than encoded voices; they are also physical artifacts whose material properties offer potent resources for creating meaning" (Hayles, 2002, p.107). In her book *Writing Machines*, she challenges the traditional binary concepts of mind and body by calling for more attention to the production tools of textual production : "[...] to change the material artifact is to transform the context and circumstances for interacting with the words, which inevitably changes the meaning of the words as well" (Hayles, 2002, p.23). Her plea for greater attention to a text's "embodiment" suggests a merge between concepts that have been traditionally separated, "media and materiality; science and literature; immersion in an imaginative realm and delight in the physical world" (p.16). In a way, she seems to be euphemistically paraphrasing Sharon Stone's hypothesis of implosion between technology and nature : "What about [a being] who has learned to live in a world in which, rather than nature becoming technologized, technology is nature - in which the boundaries between subject and environment have collapsed? " (Stone, 1991, p.446).

When one summons the memories of a novel previously read, rarely will we think of the physical construction of the book, its cover, or its appearance in our library. Usually, the plot, characters, or the representation of spaces we creatively constructed upon reading will spring up in our minds - the substance and imaginative worlds that were carefully crafted - conferring sense to the printed letters. This traditional, print-centric view reinforces the conception that text lives independently of a body, and exists as an immaterial conceptual ghost (at the exception of artist books, as pointed out by Hayles). But the binary split is shown under new light now, as electronic literature carves its way into mainstream culture alongside printed books. According to Hayles (2002, p.19), "we cannot afford to ignore material basis of literary production, if only because we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies without it". This holds even more true as large chunks of printed literature is being digitized into bits of data, to be later displayed on a varied apparatus of screen-based machines. These machines often use complex and sophisticated pointing devices, touch-screens, sensors and other metaphorical strategies that invoke distinctive senses (and combinations thereof) than the ones usually needed to navigate a book - therefore changing irrevocably the way we interact with these texts, and the way we understand them. This is what Hayles is trying to drive home in *Writing Machines*, once the context has changed, the meaning changes too.

### *Cybertext & Technotext*

To capture the essence of these new forms of texts, Hayles will propose the term *technotexts* (which she likens to *hypertexts*) as "literary works that connect the technology that produces them with the work's verbal constructions" (Hayles, 2002, p.26) and identifies three of their main characteristics : they must contain multiple reading paths, chunked text and a some kind of linking mechanism (Hayles, 2002, p.26).

Interestingly enough, Aarseth emphasizes narrative in a more preponderant way by insisting on the "non-linear" and "multicursal" (NEED REF) properties of non-traditional texts. The salient term *cybertext* used throughout his book on ergodic literature denotes

[...] the wide range of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines, as various kinds of

literary communications systems where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process. (1997, p.22)

By mashing his original definition of *text* with Donna Haraway's cyborgian concept, a "hybrid of machine and organism [...], a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (Haraway, 1991, p.150), we end up with the new term *cybertext*, a system which "contains some kind of feedback loop" (Aarseth, 1997, p.19). Once again, Aarseth takes special care in underlining the importance of the "mechanical parts" in shaping aesthetics of the cybertext - the inner workings, the functional gears that make it "work".

If Aarseth is primarily concerned about cybertexts and the analysis of non-linear structures, Hayles is busy defending materiality as a transport for meaning and creator of reflexive loops between imagined worlds and bodily interaction. Nonetheless, they share a common view that new strategies are necessary for dissecting contemporary cybertextual works, and that new media systems should shed new light on old media and the assumptions that clung to it for centuries. Aarseth goes on criticizing how traditional literary theory has become obsolete in the analysis of these new forms of texts, describing the problems of contemporary computer-generated poetics as "1) use of traditional literary genres and formats as the ideals of the new literature 2) uncritical use of traditional literary theory in the criticism of participatory literature." (Aarseth, 2002, p.141). Clearly, cybertexts (Aarseth) and technotexts (Hayles) are fundamentally different from traditional printed literature, requiring fundamentally different approaches for critical analysis.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate my intention to focus my research on the study of *cybertexts* and *technotexts* in the sense that Aarseth and Hayles consider them, as non-linear, self-looping, self-referential and self-reflective entities. I am also not interested in analyzing particular genres, or types of text in any exclusive manner for the time being. As Aarseth has shown in his graphical renderings of typology study, paper texts and electronic literature can co-exist perfectly together within the same typology (REF NEEDED), and I wish to channel my efforts on the latter rather than the former. In line with the aforementioned definitions, I will focus on texts read on a digital devices (computer, phone, television, etc.). These texts can have taken form, entirely constructed, or initiated in part on these same machines, but not necessarily. In most cases I suspect they will be, although it is not a prerequisite in order for them to be relevant to my study.

## **2.2 Mediation, Collapse, Authorship**

### *Mediation & Authorship*

An important, long-standing question in the history of literature has incessantly asked: how does reading a text change it? As print text (and I mean here, inscription by ink and paper, not necessarily books) has flooded the literary landscape for hundreds of years, theories could be generalized for this specific materiality or medium with a certain accuracy. When we consider cybertexts, especially ones read on digital devices, a new question is layered onto the old one : who is the reader, or who are the readers? If a new layer of mediation is inserted between the human reader and the signifier (text), how does the meaning (signified) change? What is the difference between reading the news in paper form, and on a screen, and how does this difference affect our constructed meaning?

To start answering these questions, we must first consider that electronic cybertexts have new properties we must deal with, which were not present before. Not only has the physical artifact completely changed from paper-based materials to plastic, metal, silicone and so on, but so has the interface. To ensure we are on the same page (so to speak), I consider the term *interface* in accordance to Allucquere Rosanne

Stone's definition, something that mediates the body and an associated "I". (Stone, 1991, p.445). This implies a particular conception of presence and space, where one can be physically present in front of a device, and their "I" completely elsewhere, far into what she calls "virtual systems". Indeed, the concept of an interface is therefore relevant for both physical and software-based metaphors of control, independently of their material structure. A child concept derived from this idea is navigation, which Aarseth stresses as being characteristic of cybertexts (REF NEEDED). Enclosed but not synonymous with interface is the electronic counterpart of the traditional paging system. Navigation is characteristic of electronic literature, usually rich in its diversity, scale and open-ended quality, allowing readers to explore a myriad of paths, generating narratives as they progress (or regress) through a text. Certainly, navigation also facilitates mediation through its physical, spatial and graphical qualities, influencing the reader in his choices with its distinct vocabulary of signs. This creates a whole new system of interaction with the text, an extra overlay of control.

As text is mediated by a digital device once, then remediated by the user again (as it is being read), a looping feedback system is created. In this regard, Hayles proposes useful insight, suggesting that the cycle of representation-simulation remediating media back and forth thus creates a looping implosion resulting from what Baudrillard called the *procession of simulacra* (Hayles, 2002, p.5). If De Saussure was right in saying that every *signified* will vary from person to person reading a text, it is then precisely this *constructed subjectivity*, this original formation resulting from the collaboration between text and reader which is caused by the mediation process. I am particularly interested in this "third space" where our body and mind, where thought and materiality collapse into a new dimension, a distinct fertile territory carrying potential for reconstructing identity, presence, subject and body, to name a few.

### *Collapse*

During this whole process, it could be assumed that a first 'collaboration' occurs between the text and the computer, then a second between the computer and the reader, and perhaps also a third between the newly constructed meaning resulting from the first collaboration and the same reader. This tentative schema of a text's tumbling between different initiators and receptors unveils an elaborate system of overlapping mediation chains. I believe these simultaneous interactions and feedback loops affecting our perception of the work in real-time ultimately results in what I referred to previously as *constructed subjectivity*. The looping process causes a merge between the text and the reader, with all mediation cycles contained in between. The autonomous simulation and production, if such a thing exists, resulting from the different mediation cycles is what I hope to be investigating in a later essay by using techniques part of natural language processing libraries.

The collapsing process between author and reader is elegantly presented by Roland Barthes in his essay *From Work To Text* (1979), as he metaphorically compares reading a text to playing an instrument. He explains how practising an instrument *plays* music (or writes text), but while playing, the musician also *listens* (reading text). These two roles cannot be dissociated from each other, and eventually they come together in *sound*, which is unique to every individual. In his own words : "[...] the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to lessen) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together in a single signifying process" (Barthes, 1979).

This constant back and forth between signs, substance, materiality and thought creates a thick fog cloud around the common perception we have of an author. Traditionally the "father and the owner of his work" (Barthes, 1979), the author is now reconfigured and separated into numerous strands that includes the reader, the interface and, if we adhere to Hayle's viewpoint, the designer of the artifact. Multi-authored texts, ephemeral literature and interpersonal interactions are just a few of the interesting cybertexts and

technotexts which exist on the Web, namely because they are “temporal and irreproducible” (Aarseth, REF NEEDED) due to their constant metamorphosis, and often undecipherable author(s).

### **3. The start**

To recapitulate the main thoughts from this essay, Aarseth and Hayles are both pushing for more specific and robust tools, frameworks and vocabularies when analysing cybertexts and technotexts (Hayles calls this “media-specific analysis”), although she is more insistent on considering embodiment and Aarseth prefers hammering away at narrative structure and the multicursal qualities of a text. The new medium that emerged from the digital revolution entails a whole new set of rules about its mediation, its authorship and ultimately, its meaning. If we hope to understand these new texts, I believe we must first comprehend how they work, and remain alert to the different mechanisms that mediate our construction of this meaning.

On a closing note, I wish to restate my original assertion that this short analysis on the definitions and delineations of certain terms (cybertext, technotext, constructed subjectivity) using Hayles’ and Aarseth’s views as the anchors of my research should merely constitute a jumping board from which to launch more ambitious undertakings.